The QL Report

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The big news this month, as most of you by now should know, is that you can order the QL from American Express. That is the good news. The bad news is, of course, you have to have an American Express card. The cost is $ 499 plus $ 8 shipping plus the applicable sales tax for your state. Expected delivery is four to six weeks. You can put the payment on the installment plan and take ten months to pay without being charged any interest! So, for about $ 50 a month you can have a state of the art computer. The toll free number for American Express to order your QL is 1-800-528-8000.

Through American Express you can also order a Sinclair QL color monitor for $ 399 and a Sinclair printer for $349 . American Express did not say who made these two items. If you buy all three items at the same time you do not receive a discount but you can use the no-interest installment plan on these two items as well as on the computer.

A lot of you have already ordered the computer and some of you have already ordered software from us. Our QL catalog is ready so write us for a copy. Prices have not as of this date been finalized but if you want something call and we will quote you a cost. Price sheets will be available as soon as we know American Express is delivering. We have added a lot more software, some of which we will discuss briefly in this Report.

The timing for the QL could not be better. Industry experts are expressing grave doubts as to whether Atari can stay alive long enough financially to bring out the ST in July. Commodore is also in serious trouble and has delayed the release of the Amiga which was supposed to have been out this month. With Sinclair actually accepting orders (through American Express) the QL should have a very comfortable lead in the under $ 1000 32 bit market before there is any competition. And for every one QL that is sold, bought probably by a loyal Sinclair "fanatic," think of how many "regular" people will buy one after seeing how much value Sinclair delivers for the price?

Truly professional software is also beginning to appear. Sinclair Research is distributing Cash Trader, an excellent accounting package for the small business, and is set to release Integrated Accounts, a more detailed accounting package already available on the IBM and Apricot . These packages are selling in the U.K. so hopefully it will not be long before they are made available here in the States. We will review Cash Trader in the next month or two.

We mentioned last month that we were using a Spectrum microdrive connected to our QL. We feel we must inform you that it cannot be considered totally reliable. Two cartridges out of 12 tested refused to list a directory or load any programs. These same cartridges were also hard to list on microdrive 2; the directory came up on microdrive 1 without any problems. We used 2 different Spectrum microdrives and the same two cartridges caused problems on both. With the two cartridges in question the drive chattered constantly , would not load or list anything and kept running until the reset button was pushed. At this point in time it seems as if semi- faulty catridges are causing the problems but remember that Spectrum microdrives were never intended to run on the QL.

It is annoying and probably risky to reset the computer while the drive is engaged in order to stop it and we certainly are not recommending it. The chances for loss of data are too great. We will pass along more information as we receive it on this subject.

While the Spectrum microdrive may be unreliable (on the QL) , the 2 QL microdrives are superb. They are so superb that Sir Clive in England told QL User magazine that anyone whose microdrives give "less than 99% performance" could send their QL back to Sinclair Research for a new machine . As we have previously reported, we have had our QL since late January and the drives have NEVER failed. I received a call this last week from one of the companies we deal with in England and the gentleman told me he duplicates all his programs for resale on a QL and has done over 1000 copies without any failures.

If there is a fault with the microdrives, it is their inherent inability to store over 100K worth of data per cartridge. For most applications, such as letters on Quill or graphs on a program like Easel, 100K is fine. However, for an author typing a manuscript or a company using a large database in something like Archive, constant changing of cartridges can prove tedious and waste time.

Added memory is one way around this. Another way is to add a disk-based system and as promised last month we are going to look at the first, and probably the best, disk interface available, the Q-Disk by Cambridge Systems Technology.

CST's Q-Disk uses the Sinclair defined standard format of 512 bytes per sector, 9 sectors per track, 40 or 80 tracks. Average access time is 350ms versus 3.5s for microdrives; 32k loads in 2.4s versus 7.8s for microdrive. The interface accepts up to 2 single-sided or double-sided drives,in 3,3.5 ,or 5.25 inch disks, providing the drives have external power. We are using a single Acorn drive(Teac),double sided , which formats 1440 sectors for an incredible 720K per disk! Two of these would give one 1.44 Megabytes of online storage (the equivalent of 15 microdrive cartridges).

The interface plugs into either the QL itself or a QL peripheral expansion module via the expansion port on the left side of the computer. Q-Disk contains an on board ROM that contains a standard QDOS directory device driver making use similar to that of the built in microdrives.

In addition, Q-Disk supplies a number of additional SuperBASIC keywords that provide useful features such as wildcard directory listings, random access files, job control and even device defaulting. A two year guarantee comes with the interface. A conversion disk is supplied which allows one to change all microdrive reference in a program to floppy disk commands. The conversion disk also asks whether you have twin drives and if you do not changes all references from mdv2 to flp1.

We have all the Psion programs on disk. For example, we have a Quill disk that holds the actual program and all of our documents. The program takes up roughly 80K so that leaves over 600K of storage for files!

There are other disk interfaces available, some less expensive, but remember that this has most of the commands found in Sinclair's QL Toolkit which retails in England for approximately $34.95 (and that doesn't include shipping to the States). We have the Q-Disk on order and will have stock by the time you receive your QL. We also have a limited supply of Acorn single drives.

Last month we mentioned we would discuss programming languages on the QL and want to touch briefly on this subject now. The QL is a typical Sinclair machine in that it is a programmers delight. SuperBASIC is much more powerful than ZX-81 or Spectrum Sinclair basic mainly due to its use of procedures. For example, once one defines a procedure in SuperBASIC, to use it again one simply has to call up the name of the procedure--it's that simple.

There are a number of languages which we will be reviewing in the coming months that we want to acquaint you with. We have most of them in stock or on order. Metacomco has BCPL and an excellent version of LISP and is releasing this month their version of PASCAL. Computer One already has PASCAL available and FORTH. BCPL seems to be the language a lot of British programmers like on the QL. A number of commercial programs available are written in this language. APL for the QL comes in two different versions-a keyword version for beginners and the regular version using the Greek symbols. We can furnish documentation on most of these programs if you want additional information.

A mouse for the QL is up and running in England and being debugged. It will retail for probably under $ 150 in the States. There will be two programs with it, one a GEM-like program using icons, and a graphics package. Details are sketchy but we will have more in later issues.

Your version 2.1 of the Psion programs, unlike the version 1.0, will allow you to run a clock concurrently with the four programs, but it does slow them down considerably. We had a clock on screen running with EASEL and it took about three times as long to redraw the screen after each command. There are also some undocumented commands in these versions. For example, SHIFT and F4 pressed together changes the background color on the programs.

The DP Sprite Generator we have on order is excellent. It comes with two demo pictures. One shows an alien in front of the sun and in the distance you can see the Earth rotating, showing all the continents! The other demo is of a bird flying between two trees-it literally flies behind one of the trees. There are 256 different depth planes to help you achieve this.

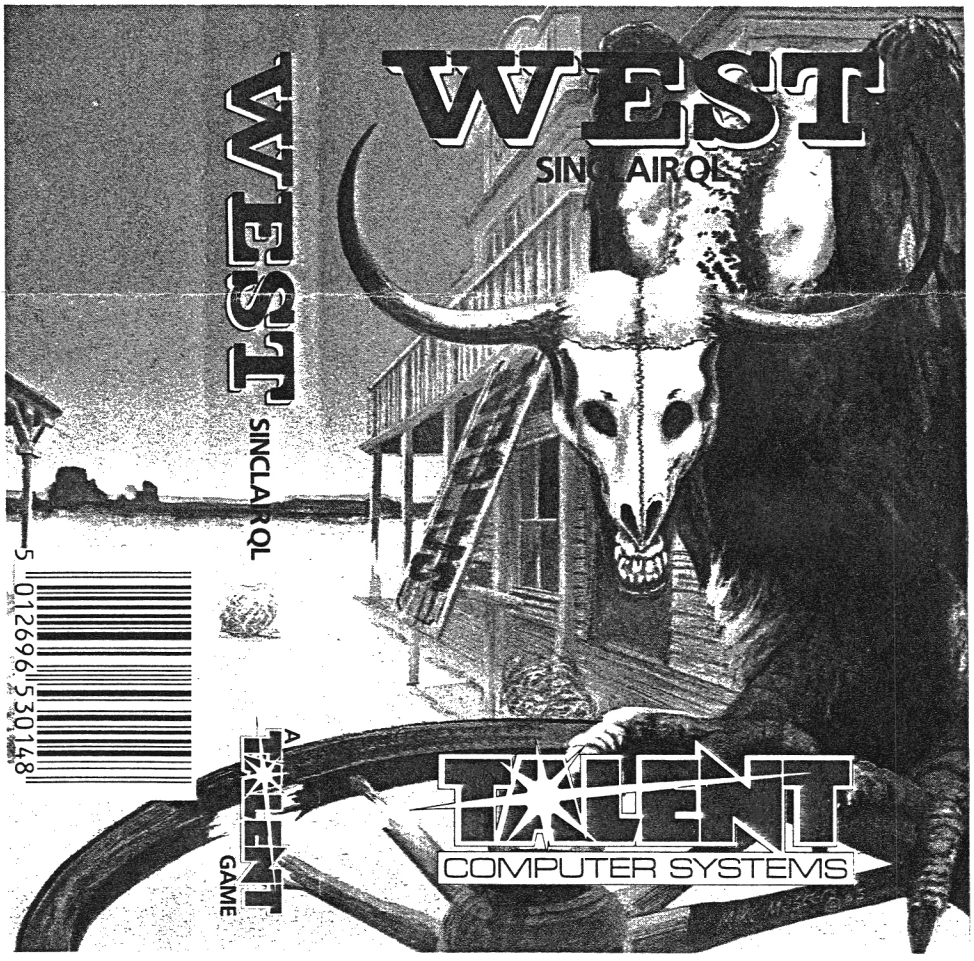
To serve you better we are now offering FREE UPS 2nd day shipping anywhere in the continental U.S. for orders over $50.00 (software or books with software only and some hardware). That means you can live in Maine and order on a Monday and your goods will arrive on Thursday if we have them in stock.

By next issue some of you will have your machine and others will have one on order. Call or write with any questions you have concerning installation or running of programs and we will answer them to the best of our ability. See you next month.

Back issues of this Report (February through the current month) are available for 75 cents per issue.

Full instructions behind this cover

Type of game: ADVENTURE

You are on the track of a notorious gang of bank robbers who have gone to ground near an abandoned mining town deep in Indian territory. Your task—to outwit and outgun the robbers, collect as much loot as possible and piece together clues on how to escape.

A demanding and exciting text adventure for the experienced games-player, using over 200 words and as many phrases. There are more than 130 locations to search, not all of them easy to find. Events happen in real-time—Indians charge, rattle-snakes slither past and robbers appear and shoot at you. Test the speed of your draw, your skill at cards—and your powers of survival!